

THE MILAN DIPTYCH: A SIXTH-CENTURY GOSPEL BOOK COVER IN THE
POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF RAVENNA

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ABSTRACT

SARAH A. MILLER: The Milan Diptych: A Sixth-Century Gospel Book Cover in the
Political Landscape of Ravenna
(Under the direction of Dorothy H. Verkerk)

The Milan Diptych, an ivory and jewel-studded gospel book cover carved with scenes from the Life of Christ, is an outstanding exemplar of late antique ivory carving on the Italian peninsula. In previous scholarship, the diptych has been assigned to the fifth century and discussed as a work with self-contained theological meaning. In this thesis, I assign the Milan Diptych to Ravenna in the late sixth century due to a vocabulary of symbolism shared with Ravennate sarcophagi, as well as iconographic parallels with the imperial churches and baptisteries at Ravenna. I demonstrate that political meaning embedded in the iconographic program of the Milan Diptych is predicated on Ravenna's architectural mosaic programs of the sixth century, and I also give evidence for imperial patronage, based on political imagery occurring in both the diptych and the mosaics that addresses the relationship between earthly and heavenly power.

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INTRODUCTION

A set of ivory book covers commonly known as the Milan Diptych, whose sparkling metalwork additions distinguish it from other contemporary ivories, resides in the Treasury of the Milan Cathedral.¹ Each 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ inch cover is composed of five ivory panels that depict two symbolic representations of Christ and sixteen narrative scenes from the Lives of Christ and the Virgin. The symbols, the Agnus Dei and the cross, are wrought in silver and inlaid with garnet and other precious stones. These metalwork and jeweled additions are affixed to the central panel of each cover, framed by architectural niches and unveiled by carved drapery—reflecting the standard theme of revelation present in the earliest Christian art.² Each cover also features two canonical symbols of the Evangelists in its upper corners—man and ox on one cover, lion and eagle on the other—and two naturalistic (though generic) portraits of the gospel authors in its lower corners. Each of these images is enclosed in a victory wreath.

Between these visual references to divine authorship run long rectangular scenes of the Nativity, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Adoration of the Magi, and the

¹ R. Bossaglia and M. Cinotti, eds. *Tesoro e Museo del Duomo* (Milan: Electa, 1978).

² The terms “early Christian” and “late antique” both refer to the centuries encompassing the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of separate Western and Eastern Empires in the Middle Ages, though the latter term describes more accurately the wide array of religious and cultural practices that characterized this period. In this thesis, I use “early Christian” to refer specifically to Christian art or religious practices during the third through sixth centuries, and “late antique” to refer to broader culture in the same centuries.

Miracle at Cana. These rectangular panels and circular wreaths frame other scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin, which appear in smaller square panels in loosely chronological order on either side of the metalwork centerpiece. The Agnus Dei cover features the Annunciation in the upper left position, and subsequent events are read in chronological order from left to right: an ambiguous vignette usually identified as the Trial of Bitter Water, the Magi seeing the star, Christ Among the Doctors, and the Entry into Jerusalem [Figure 1]. On the Cross cover, the scenes are meant to be read downward rather than left to right. The miracles of Christ such as the Healing of the Blind Man, the Healing of the Paralytic, and the Raising of Lazarus are grouped in the left column and read downward. The right column contains a non-chronological grouping of scenes: a vignette traditionally identified as the *Traditio Legis*, the Last Supper, and the Widow's Mite [Figure 2].³

The diptych's provenance is first recorded in the inventory of the Milan Cathedral in 1385; it has generally been assigned an Italian provenance in keeping with its current location, as well as on the basis of style.⁴ Wolfgang Volbach's 1916 catalogue of ivory works includes a cursory description of the piece, attributing it to a North Italian workshop during the second half of the fifth century.⁵ In a later catalogue,

³ The scenes typically identified as the Trial of Bitter Water and the *Traditio Legis* contain inconsistencies that bring these identifications into question. The Trial of Bitter Water attribution is discussed in Chapter Two, and the *Traditio Legis* attribution is discussed in Chapter Three.

⁴ G. Stuhlfauth, *Die Altchristliche Elfenbeinplastik* (Freiburg: JCB Mohr, 1896), 66, and R. Delbrück, *Denkmäler spätantiker Kunst* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1927), 5-6, have assigned it specifically to Milan.

⁵ W. F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* (Mainz: 1952), 84. Volbach gives the diptych a late fifth-century terminus based on two scenes that show influence from an apocryphal account of the Virgin's life, imagery which disappeared around

Joseph Natanson narrows this time frame to 460-480.⁶ The diptych was recently published in a catalogue of Early Christian art compiled by Jeffrey Spier, in which it is also attributed to Northern Italy in the second half of the fifth century.⁷ Both Spier and Volbach note a possible connection to Ravenna, but no published works have pursued this as a more likely provenance than Milan.

Ravenna was closely linked to Milan in political and ecclesiastical affairs as well as stylistic trends, so attribution to a Ravennate workshop, supported through iconographic evidence, would be tenable.⁸ Wolfgang Kemp and Jeffrey Spier have produced the most thorough analyses of the diptych's theological program to date,⁹ but no comparative study of its iconography, symbolism, or possible political meaning has yet been undertaken. These issues are addressed in this thesis, which proposes for the diptych the specific origin of Ravenna and a revised date in the late sixth century.

Chapter One is devoted to the Milan Diptych's iconographic program, where I identify a common vocabulary of symbolism in the diptych and local Ravennate sarcophagi, which forms the foundation of my thesis that the Milan Diptych is connected to this city. Chapter Two introduces a discussion of architecture by examining the unusual portrayal of the Virgin, which I call "the Aristocratic Mary," in

this time. These apocryphal sources as they relate to the Milan Diptych narratives are discussed in Chapter Two.

⁶ J. Natanson, *Early Christian Ivories* (London: Alec Tirani Ltd., 1953), 27.

⁷ J. Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2007), 256-258.

⁸ J. Beckwith, "The Werden Casket Reconsidered" *The Art Bulletin* 40, No. 1 (1958): 4.

⁹ W. Kemp, *Christliche Kunst: Ihre Anfänge, Ihre Strukturen* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1994), 43-46, and Spier, 256-258.

both the Milan Diptych and Ravennate architectural mosaics. Chapter Three identifies what I believe to be the primary theme of the diptych's narrative scenes, the relationship between earthly and heavenly power. I discuss the complex presentation of this relationship through scene choice, construction of gesture, and details of dress and position. This political theme further connects the Milan Diptych to Ravenna due to scene compositions that suggest its artist was familiar with the mosaic programs of San Vitale and the Arian and Orthodox Baptisteries. In the conclusion, I argue for imperial patronage based on the information set forth in the previous three chapters.

Consular Diptychs and the Development of the Gospel Book Cover

It is important to establish the secular origins of the format for ivory gospel book covers, considering that the Milan Diptych, an ecclesiastical object, also contains significant political themes. Before being appropriated for ecclesiastical use, ivory diptychs had an earlier, extensive life in the political sector. Consular diptychs—two slender ivory plaques, hinged in the center, decorated with relief carvings and space for inscriptions—were given as gifts in the fifth and sixth centuries to commemorate events or relay messages between Roman consuls and lesser magistrates, or even the emperor himself. Edward Capps notes that the five-part diptych, the same format used on the Milan Diptych, was an exclusive type for gifts exchanged with the emperor.¹⁰ The Barberini Ivory, one half of a diptych constructed in a similar five-panel arrangement, is

¹⁰ E. Capps, Jr. "The Style of the Consular Diptychs," in *The Art Bulletin* 10, No. 1 (1927), 62.

one such example [Figure 3].¹¹ Carved in the first half of the sixth century, its central panel displays a triumphant Justinian being offered homage and tribute. Considering similarities in assembly and format between these two contemporary pieces, it is reasonable to conclude that five-paneled ivory gospel book covers and consular diptychs developed from a common tradition. It is also likely that these ivory diptychs would have been commissioned and offered as gifts by the same class of people—the imperial family. Oleg Grabar has written extensively on the historical function of luxury objects as tokens of loyalty and political allegiance, particularly at the Byzantine court.¹² In the same way, these ivory works, though ecclesiastical in theme, would also have carried political implications through gift exchange. The Milan Diptych is a primary example of an object that contains overt political imagery couched in religious stories. Thus, no clear distinction may be made between “ecclesiastical” and “secular” in these ivory diptychs.

The Milan Diptych Among its Contemporaries

Ivory gospel book covers typically featured enthroned portraits of Christ and the Virgin, one on each side, between abbreviated scenes from their lives, most commonly the events prefiguring Christ’s birth and the miracles he performed in adulthood. A Syrian or possibly Byzantine set of book covers from the late sixth century known as

¹¹ For more information on the Barberini ivory, see A. Cutler, “Barberiniana: Notes on the Making, Content, and Provenance of Louvre OA. 9063,” in *Tesserae: Festschrift für Josef Engemann, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, Ergänzungsband 18 (1993), 329-339.

¹² O. Grabar, “The Shared Culture of Objects,” in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington, D.C., 1997), 115-129. The relationship between the Milan Diptych and the Byzantine court during Justinian’s reign is addressed in Chapter Three.

the Saint-Lupicin Diptych exemplifies this type [Figure 4].¹³ Its creator used a simplified format of four miracle scenes (the Healings of the Blind Man and the Paralytic being the two most common) between the enthroned portrait of Christ and two of his disciples. The Murano Diptych, dating from the early sixth century and carved in the unique style of the Alexandrian workshop, is composed in similar manner [Figure 5].¹⁴ Each cover also contains winged personifications of Victory bearing cross-inscribed victory wreaths, lingering Greco-Roman symbols that acquired new meaning in a Christian context. The Milan Diptych conforms to this standard format for ivory book covers, which was also in common use at artistic centers across the empire as distant as Syria, Constantinople, and Alexandria.

Though the basic compositional format in all three gospel book covers is the same, the Milan Diptych stands out from its contemporaries in several details. First, the program of the Milan Diptych may be said to be more symbolically complex than the Saint-Lupicin and Murano Diptychs. The cross-inscribed wreaths, which connote themes of victory—in context, Christian victory over death,¹⁵ as well as the victory of Christianity over paganism—are reinterpreted in the Milan Diptych by eliminating the personifications of Victory, repeating the wreath motif multiple times on each cover, and intertwining it with symbols of Christ and the gospel authors. This endows the diptych with complex symbolism, which I discuss further in Chapter One.

¹³ See Volbach, 71-72.

¹⁴ See Volbach, 64. I use general dates assigned by both Volbach and Natanson for both of these book covers.

¹⁵ The Roman victory wreath as crown symbolizes both Christ's victory over death and the early Christian attitude toward martyrdom, a theme prevalent in many of Paul's letters, most notably 2 Corinthians 9:25.

Additionally, the Milan Diptych is more visually dense than the Saint-Lupicin or Murano Diptychs. The complexity of symbolism in this diptych suggests that its artist was working from aesthetic sensibilities that are more closely allied to the early medieval period than to the Roman period. In addition to the four scenes of Christ's miracles, the Murano Diptych contains typological references to the Book of Job and the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace, both Old Testament scenes that were hallmarks of early Christian funerary art because they prefigured Christ. In the Milan Diptych, typological references such as this are absent. Additionally, the canonical symbols of the gospel authors were not in common use until the early medieval period. This leads me to characterize the Milan Diptych as a bridge between late antiquity and the early medieval period, and to suggest that the Milan Diptych be attributed to a date later than the fifth century, to which scholars have previously assigned it on the basis of style.

CHAPTER I. A SHARED SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE: THE CROSS, AGNUS DEI, AND WREATH IN RAVENNA

On the central panels of Milan Diptych, the person of Christ is represented through the use of symbols—images with codified shape and meaning—rather than a naturalistic portrait. This method of representation is useful in assigning a date to the diptych. These symbols create complex meanings that belie their visual simplicity; symbols are juxtaposed and combined on these central panels, and one standard image frequently modifies another, creating the possibility for multiple layers of meaning. The Lamb, given a halo and enclosed in a wreath, becomes the Agnus Dei—the Lamb of God. The wreath itself is composed of olive branches, sheaves of wheat, clusters of grapes, and branches bearing fruit, each of which can possess individual symbolic value. Wheat, for example, can reference death and grapes can reference Eucharistic wine. The cross symbol on the opposite cover is composed of jewels, and it is established on a mount from which flow the four rivers of Paradise. This mount is placed in an architectural niche of Corinthian columns, and curtains are drawn back as if presenting the cross to the viewer in a moment of revelation. These elements—the cross, its jewels, the Four Rivers of Paradise, the veil, the Agnus Dei, the halo, and the wreath—are all symbolic devices in the Milan Diptych used to convey meaning in a method other than narrative representation. Here, in the central panels, these symbols represent the beginnings of a medieval approach to constructing a portrait of Christ.

In the introduction, I categorized the Milan Diptych as a work that fit the early medieval rather than the late antique aesthetic. I make this attribution because its program favors individual symbols over typological narrative, a suggestion I would like to explore further. Though the Milan Diptych contains several narrative scenes, the whole of its meaning does not hinge on the unfolding narrative of sequential events. The creator of this diptych also drew from a repository of popular symbols established during the early Christian period and expanded through the medieval era to construct meaning. These symbols, and their unique combination, are important because they suggest an origin and a date for the piece.

Symbols such as the Chi-Rho, the Alpha and Omega, the Good Shepherd, the cross, the fish, the anchor, peacocks, doves, *orant* figures, fruit-laden vines (particularly grapes and wheat), and palm branches or palm trees were popular in the funerary architecture and sarcophagi of late antique Rome, Syria, and Palestine. In Ravenna, some of these symbols were preferred over others and used repeatedly on sarcophagi and in the mosaic ornamentation of the city's architectural spaces in the fourth through eighth centuries. This suggests that a visual theological language permeated all forms of art in this geographic area. Three symbols that had particularly heavy usage in Ravenna—the cross, lamb, and wreath—are also used in the central panels of the Milan Diptych. In this chapter I present a detailed analysis of these symbols and trace their usage in Ravenna. I also establish the vocabulary of symbolism operating in local workshops by comparing these symbols to sarcophagi and architecture known to have been produced in Ravenna, which suggest that the Milan Diptych was created at this artistic center.

The Cross Cover

The Cross on the Milan Diptych may be described as a portrait constructed with symbols, designed to reference multiple aspects of Christ's nature in one image. The cross itself is composed of several types of round and square jewels and affixed to the central ivory panel. This jeweled cross is situated on a mount from which flow four rope-like streams of water, which are the four rivers of Paradise referenced in Genesis.¹⁶ The cross is framed in an architectural niche of two Corinthian columns and a lintel. In the rectangular space this creates, two curtains are being drawn aside as if to unveil the cross for viewing and contemplation. The elements of this symbol are thus: cross, jewels, four rivers of Paradise, and the veil [Figure 2].

In architectural mosaics at Ravenna, the cross is the central feature of many interior domed spaces. The early fifth-century Mausoleum of Galla Placidia has a gold cross at the apex of its central dome in the middle of a celestial sea of stars; symbols of the four evangelists, which are also used on the Milan Diptych, are found in the corners of the pendentives [Figure 6].¹⁷ The Arch-Episcopal chapel of the bishops of Ravenna, built almost a century later, repeats this cross-and-starry-sky motif with evangelist symbols in its apse and domed ceiling. In the sixth-century Arian Baptistry, a jeweled cross is seated on a lavish throne, toward which the twelve apostles, with their crown,

¹⁶ Genesis 2:10-14.

¹⁷ Although I refer to the structure by its commonly accepted name, it is unlikely that the small cruciform structure commissioned by Galla Placidia was ever a mausoleum. Galla Placidia died in Rome and was likely buried there. This structure's vernacular title of 'mausoleum' is probably a later misunderstanding of its function, as the building currently houses three empty sarcophagi. G. Bovini, in *Ravenna* (New York: Abrams, 1973), 29, acknowledges that this structure was originally a chapel connected to the Church of the Holy Cross. See also D. Deliyannis, "'Bury Me in Ravenna?': Appropriating Galla Placidia's Body in the Middle Ages," *Studi Medievali* 42 (2001): 289-99.

progress in a circle [Figure 7]. The cross in this context functions perhaps as a symbolic stand-in for Christ, as the apostles seem ready to cast their crowns at his metaphorical feet.¹⁸ The mosaic-covered apse of Sant' Apollinare in Classe, the port city of Ravenna at the height of its commerce in the fifth and sixth centuries, uses a jeweled cross to reference the person of Christ in a similar manner.¹⁹ Such jeweled crosses may have also been used in the liturgy. Mosaic panels in the Basilica of San Vitale depict the Byzantine imperial couple Justinian and Theodora at the head of a procession, carrying the elements of the Eucharist; some scholars believe this is an imaginative presentation of the procession that accompanied the consecration of the church in 548.²⁰ At Justinian's side, Bishop Maximian of Ravenna stands holding a jeweled cross [Figure 8a]. Though a processional context might suggest liturgical use, this might be identified as the gold-and-jeweled reliquary cross that Maximian commissioned for the church, which is referenced in an eighth-century primary source.²¹ In either case, the jeweled cross was a common image in mosaic and in worship in the city of Ravenna and was also found on local sarcophagi.

¹⁸ The casting of crowns at the foot of Christ's heavenly throne is part of the worship described in Revelation 4 and an important repeated theme in architectural mosaics, sarcophagi, and also the Milan Diptych. The crown was a biblical symbol for a life spent in pursuit of Christ awarded specially to martyrs.

¹⁹ G. Bustacchini, *Ravenna: Capital of Mosaic* (Ravenna: Cartolibreria Salbaroli, 1988), 143.

²⁰ See W. Treadgold, "Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale, in *The Art Bulletin* 79, No. 4 (1997), 708-723, for further information on several proposed interpretations of these panels.

²¹ "[Maximian] ordered a great cross of gold to be made and he decorated it with most precious gems and pearls, jacinths and amethysts and sard and emeralds, and in the middle part of the cross, set in gold, he placed some of the wood of our holy redeeming cross, where the body of the Lord hung. And it is a very great weight of gold." Agnellus of Ravenna, *The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*, trans. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 194.

On these sarcophagi, the cross functions in many different ways. Earlier figural sarcophagi, such as the fifth-century Rinaldo Sarcophagus and Twelve Apostles Sarcophagus, have a large cross in a central position on the main panel in the back, inscribed in a circle or a wreath and flanked by two facing peacocks.²² Crosses appear in this same format (compositionally balanced between vines and facing doves) on the sides of the lid. On figural sarcophagi, the cross is frequently used but not as the central feature. In later sarcophagi of the symbolic group, such as the sixth-century Lamb Sarcophagus, Honorius Sarcophagus, and an unnamed sarcophagus residing in Sant' Apollinare in Classe, the cross is placed in a central position on the front.²³ These sarcophagi feature simplified compositions that favor symbols rather than figures. Here, the cross is used in a more monumental and presentational context; it is situated in architectural niches using Corinthian columns, or accentuated by a drawn-back veil. Jeweled crosses, rather than plain crosses, are also more frequently represented on these later sarcophagi.²⁴ On the front of the Lamb Sarcophagus, a large, stark cross is placed between two lambs that face the cross; directly above, on the front of the lid, two doves face a second cross, which is inscribed within a wreath [Figure 9]. Crosses on the

²² I use the dating proposed by M. Lawrence in *The Sarcophagi of Ravenna* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1970) for all sarcophagi mentioned in this thesis. Regarding the jeweled cross: the back of the Rinaldo Sarcophagus actually features a jeweled Chi-Rho rather than a plain cross. The Chi-Rho and cross appear to be used interchangeably within the oeuvre of Ravennate sarcophagi—situated on the same area of the sarcophagus, circumscribed by a wreath, between facing peacocks or lambs, and so on—regardless of the date of individual sarcophagi. Therefore I include representations of the Chi-Rho in my discussion of the cross symbol, because they seem to signify very similar meanings.

²³ J. Kollwitz and H. Herdejuegen, *Die Ravennatischen Sarkophage* (Berlin: Mann, 1979), 38-39, 70-72.

²⁴ Examples of the jeweled cross can be found on the Lamb Sarcophagus and Barbatianus Sarcophagus, also published in Lawrence (1970).

Honorius Sarcophagus, which resides in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, are placed in architectural niches, coupled with the Agnus Dei [Figure 10]. The Agnus Dei and Cross, the two primary symbols of the Milan Diptych, are thus juxtaposed on several Ravennate sarcophagi. The cross is also represented in an architectural niche on the Sarcophagus from Sant' Apollinare in Classe, with the added symbolism of the veil.

As the veil has power both to conceal and to reveal, the motif of unveiling has important symbolic significance. The Milan Diptych's cross is framed by draped curtains that are drawn and knotted on each side.²⁵ In the Sarcophagus from Sant' Apollinare in Classe, the top half of the curtain remains intact; the effect is not only that of revelation of the cross, but it is also visually implied that the cross has pierced the curtain and thus divided it [Figure 11]. This may be a theological reference to the veil in the temple that separated the Holy of Holies, which was torn from the top down at the moment of crucifixion.²⁶ Revelation of the cross, in both the Milan Diptych and Ravennate sarcophagi, is thus equated with revelation of Jesus Christ. Similar drapery appears in the aforementioned Justinian and Theodora panels of San Vitale and the colonnades of Theodoric's palace in the nave mosaic at Sant' Apollinare Nuovo [Figure 8b]. Thus, the image of a veil pulled aside in revelation was a common motif in this area.

The four rivers of Paradise that flow from the foot of the cross in the Milan Diptych also frequently appear on sixth-century Ravennate sarcophagi, as well as in the apse of the Basilica of San Vitale. The symbol—visualized as rope-like streams flowing

²⁵ The composition is the same, merely the emphasis differs: sarcophagus emphasizes the veil, the diptych emphasizes the cross.

²⁶ Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45.

from a rocky mount—is drawn from the description of Eden in Genesis, but most frequently used in the context of future heavenly paradise, such as in the San Vitale mosaic, which depicts the heavenly throne of Christ as described in Revelation [Figure 12].²⁷ Used in these contexts, the four rivers connote a perfect, unstained, rightly-ordered state of the world.

On Ravennate sarcophagi, the four rivers of Paradise are used as the foundational base for the Agnus Dei, frequently juxtaposed with the cross, as mentioned above. On one side of the Lamb sarcophagus, the four rivers of Paradise flow from below a cross; on the other side, the Agnus Dei stands in front of a jeweled cross. The Honorius Sarcophagus combines these two symbols, representing on its front panel a lamb (the Agnus Dei) standing in front of a cross, which is established on a mount from which flow the four rivers of Paradise [Figure 10]. Furthermore, this scene is framed in an architectural niche using Corinthian columns. These two images juxtapose symbols of Christ's identity as Savior and Sacrifice with an image evoking Paradise. In this way, the four rivers of Paradise become a modifying symbol that further describes the identity of Christ put forth in the Agnus Dei and Cross symbols. The Milan Diptych, which also shows the jeweled cross established on the mount of the four rivers, uses this method of symbolic representation. In fact, the sixth-century Honorius sarcophagus basically conflates into one image each of the major symbols used on the Milan Diptych.

In conclusion, the Milan Diptych's compositional use of the cross symbol mirrors the cross as commonly presented on Ravennate sarcophagi from the sixth

²⁷ Genesis 2:10, Revelation 4-5. This type of representation can be found in the apse of San Vitale, where Christ sits enthroned on a celestial orb holding the scroll with seven seals, with four rivers flowing from the rocky ground below.

century: a central, monumental symbol modified by signifiers such as jewels, an architectural niche with a veil, and four rivers of paradise. The multi-layered symbolism of the cross thus represents a theological statement about Christ's nature: the cross signifying triumph over death, jewels signifying the radiance of the heavenly throne, the four rivers of Paradise signifying the restored wholeness of creation, and the drawn-back veil implying revelation of eternal life.

The Agnus Dei and Wreath Cover

The Lamb panel of the Milan Diptych contains the same combination of metalwork and ivory carving featured in the Cross panel. A long-tailed lamb composed of silver and inlaid with garnet is affixed to the center of a fruited wreath. The lamb is nimbed, marking it as the Agnus Dei. Rather than possessing the typical cruciform halo, however, this Lamb has been crowned with a leafy nimbus reminiscent of Roman victory wreaths, the visual type for Early Christian crowns of martyrdom.²⁸ The wreath that encloses the lamb is carved of ivory and set before an architectural niche of Corinthian columns. Two flowing ribbons wrap the base of the wreath, and the top is crowned by a flower—both standard details of the Roman victory wreaths that mark consular diptychs. Less traditional is its composition: the wreath is composed of olive branches, sheaves of wheat, grape vines, and various fruits and cones [Figure 1]. Featured here are two symbols with different histories of usage, which, when combined, form a unique hallmark symbol that is highly unusual in early Christian art. Because the juxtaposition of lamb and wreath is so rare, the other examples of wreaths, lambs, and

²⁸ For history of the wreath in Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, see E. Goodenough, "The Crown of Victory in Judaism," in *The Art Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (1946): 139-59.

the wreathed lamb that exist at Ravenna are strong indications that the Milan Diptych is a product of this geographic artistic center.

The lamb was one of the earliest Christian symbols, used since the third century both as a reference for Christians (more generally, the “flock” of God), and as a reference for Christ, the sacrificial Lamb of God.²⁹ In Ravenna, the image of a lamb is used in both these ways—as a general symbol for Christians and a specific symbol for Christ. When lambs are used as a general symbol on Ravennate sarcophagi, the sarcophagi feature lambs flanking or facing the cross.³⁰ Some sarcophagi, such as the Constantius Sarcophagus, feature both ordinary lambs and the Agnus Dei, which is a specific representation of the person of Christ [Figure 13]. Architectural mosaics in Ravenna follow the same principle. The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and the Basilica of Sant’ Apollinare in Classe feature flocks of sheep that could represent the Church in general, a group of individual believers, or the apostles. Each of these representations show the lambs with long tails and the Agnus Dei with its head twisted backward, as if to gaze at the viewer.

The large wreath of the Milan Diptych is unique in ivory carving from late antiquity; it fits no prototypes of previous wreath imagery, as it is composed of various fruits and cones, vines rich with grapes, sheaves of wheat, and olive branches. Each element is grouped into four quadrants of the wreath, indicating that they may have

²⁹ The Shepherd/sheep metaphor for the relationship between God and his people is established in several psalms, notably Psalms 23 and 100.

³⁰ Lawrence, 35, reads this image as a symbolic interpretation of the *Traditio Legis*, a popular scene on Ravennate figural sarcophagi that shows Christ handing over the law to Peter and Paul. The composition using three lambs is thus a uniquely Ravennate creation, and it indicates the flexibility of the *Traditio Legis* composition at Ravenna, which was also modified to create the hybrid *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns image present on the Milan Diptych.

individual symbolic value, likely indicative of the Eucharist. The smaller wreath, which crowns the head of the Agnus Dei as an implied halo, resembles the leafy crowns of martyrdom carried by the apostles in the Arian and Orthodox Baptistry mosaics, and on fifth-century figural sarcophagi such as the Rinaldo Sarcophagus and Twelve Apostles Sarcophagus.

The Saint-Lupicin and Murano gospel book covers testify that Roman-style victory wreaths—made of leaves and tied with flowing ribbons, inscribed with a cross and suspended between winged Victories—were standard elements of iconography on early ivory book covers [Figures 4, 5]. These cross-inscribed wreaths (without the personified Victories) were in common use on Ravennate sarcophagi, often with the addition of the Alpha and Omega. Several figural sarcophagi, such as the previously mentioned Rinaldo and Twelve Apostles Sarcophagi, also contain sculptural examples of the crown of martyrdom wreath, which the apostles carry toward Christ's throne [Figures 14, 15]. These crowns of martyrdom enjoy prolific representation in the mosaic cycles of the Arian and Orthodox Baptisteries as well as Sant' Apollinare Nuovo [Figures 7, 16]. It is important to note that in each of these contexts, the wreath is of the leafy victory type rather than the fruit-bearing type represented in the Milan Diptych.

There is one important exception to this general observation: the ceiling mosaic of San Vitale, which features four angels upholding a medallion at the apex of the dome [Figure 17]. This medallion is actually a wreath, but not a victory wreath; rather, it is a fruit-bearing wreath, containing several varieties of apples, oranges, pears, and perhaps also figs. In its center floats a haloed Agnus Dei on a blue orb marked with golden stars. The starry background is reminiscent of Galla Placidia's Mausoleum, while the Agnus

Dei with fruit-bearing wreath recalls the composition of the Milan Diptych. Kemp confirms that these are the only two juxtapositions of lamb and fruit-bearing wreath in early Christian art.³¹ This unique iconographic detail establishes a strong link between the Milan Diptych and Ravenna on the basis of a shared symbolic language.

In summary, the central panels of the Milan Diptych, the Cross and the Agnus Dei and Wreath, combine standard symbols to make complex portraits of Christ that encompass sacrificial atonement, the victory of the cross, riches of heaven, and the restoration of Paradise. The Milan Diptych shares these common iconographic elements with local sarcophagi and architectural mosaics at Ravenna, which indicates that the Milan Diptych was likely created in a Ravennate workshop.³² The primacy of jeweled crosses, lambs, and wreaths in works of various media suggest a dialogue of motif and meaning between architectural space and portable objects that would have flourished in a common city. This is the first type of evidence that links the Milan Diptych decisively to Ravenna, which will be followed by a discussion of dress in the next chapter.

³¹ Kemp, 44.

³² In addition to symbolism, the Milan Diptych contains direct visual quotes of Ravennate sarcophagi and architecture in its narrative scenes, most notably the Adoration of the Magi and the *Traditio Legis*, discussed in conjunction with crown and processional imagery at San Vitale and Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER II. THE IMPORTANCE OF DRESS: “THE ARISTOCRATIC MARY”

The Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, appears in four of the vignettes represented on the Milan Diptych: the Annunciation, a scene traditionally identified as the Trial of Bitter Water,³³ the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi. There is a curious dichotomy in the way she is depicted: both in a plain tunic and in the ornamented robes of a wealthy aristocratic woman. In the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, Mary is clothed in the traditional garb in which the Eastern tradition continues to dress her: voluminous robes conceal the natural curves of her body, and she wears a heavy veil, called a *maphorion*, that covers her hair and shoulders. The *maphorion* was an element of Byzantine dress worn by people in various strata of society—including noble women, civic officials, and members of monastic orders—in fourth- through sixth-century Byzantium.³⁴ This modest garment was adopted for the iconography of the Virgin and other holy women, and it is still the standard depiction of the Virgin on Greek icons. When depicted plain and unornamented, as on the Milan Diptych, it

³³ There is some ambiguity regarding the identification of this scene. The text on which these narrative images are based, the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of James*, contains no scene that closely parallels the Milan Diptych image. In the text, the Trial of Bitter Water occurs not in the Temple but in the wilderness, there is no angel present, and Joseph (who is not present in the Milan scene) undertakes the trial as well. The star of Bethlehem, toward which the angel is so emphatically gesturing, also complicates the scene. It is possible that this image depicts Mary presenting the finished veil to the temple officials, the event immediately following the Annunciation. Because the nuances of scene identification (in this case) have little relevance to the arguments proposed in this thesis, I continue to use the traditional attribution.

³⁴ N. Sevcenko and A. Kazhdan, "Maphorion," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander P. Kazhdan (Oxford University Press, e-reference edition, 2005).

emphasizes neither wealth, nor class, nor femininity. This un-extraordinary depiction of Mary in two scenes makes the departure from this tradition in the other two scenes on the Milan Diptych much more startling.

In the Annunciation and the Trial of Bitter Water, Mary is clothed as an entirely different woman [Figure 18]. She wears a form-fitting gown, drawn in tightly at the waist with an ornamented belt. Her outer garment is richly decorated at the neck, and it tapers off below the knee to reveal a delicate sash and the folds of a third layer of fabric. Mary's head is uncovered, and her hair is pinned in a dramatically upswept hairstyle. This lavish ensemble emphasizes the curves of her body, the delicate femininity of her garments, her wealth and, by implication, her high social status. The artist's choice to clothe Mary in garments requiring such intricate carving of detail necessitates further exploration.

Dress functions as an important signifier in Early Christian art, as details of costume can convey nuanced theological or interpretive meaning in a compact visual space, particularly in manuscripts and mosaics. If one biblical character is shown in two types of garb within the same artwork—for example, the dual depictions of Eve in the Ashburnham Pentateuch, in both plain and wealthy clothing—it often indicates a theological message inscribed by the artist or iconographer. In this case, the manuscript presents a theological statement about Eve's character at two points in her life.³⁵ In this chapter, I show that the puzzling depiction of the Virgin Mary in two scenes from her life gives scholars clues about the patronage of the Milan Diptych, didactic meaning in its narrative program, and potential literary and iconographic influences. It also

³⁵ D. Verkerk, *Early Medieval Bible Illumination and the Ashburnham Pentateuch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 112-113.

establishes another important connection between the Milan Diptych and Ravenna. For purposes of this thesis, I call this iconographical type “the Aristocratic Mary,” for it is clear that Mary is dressed in the ornate robes of a wealthy woman.

In the Milan Diptych Annunciation, Mary is depicted beside a stream, kneeling to gather water into a narrow-necked vessel. The angel Gabriel extends his hand toward her in a gesture mirrored in almost all of the narrative vignettes; she turns toward him, as if startled. The location of this scene by a stream is an indication that the artist had knowledge of the *Infancy Gospel of James*, an extra-biblical source; at the least, it indicates that he was familiar with an iconographic arrangement based on this text. The *Infancy Gospel of James* is a literary text written between 178 and 204 that was familiar among theological circles by the third century; Christian writers such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria show knowledge of this text by conflating details from this source with the gospel accounts of the events surrounding the birth of Christ. The *Infancy Gospel* recounts events in Mary’s childhood and events from the childhood of Christ; in it, Mary is described as a wealthy woman and she receives two Annunciations; the first by a stream, and the second within her home, as she is weaving the veil for the temple.³⁶ Biblical scholar Ronald Hock believes that this account, which is written in a more colorful manner of storytelling than are the gospels, was composed to fill in gaps left in the Lucan gospel narrative. In the late second century, the satirist Celsus had made vitriolic attacks on Christian doctrine which accused Mary of poverty

³⁶ R. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa, California: 1995), 11. In addition to the *Infancy Gospel of James*, the apocryphal *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* contains a similar presentation of Mary’s childhood and adolescence in which the Annunciation is located by a fountain.

and low social status.³⁷ Describing Mary as the progeny of a wealthy family was thus an attempt to counteract the verbal persecution of pagan philosophers. After this account became well-known among theological circles in the third century, it was translated into image. The iconography of these early extant Annunciations was less a formulaic arrangement of figures than it was a codified depiction of Mary dressed in aristocratic robes. Exemplars of this aristocratic dress can be found in architectural mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.

Santa Maria Maggiore, a significant basilica in early Christian Rome whose mosaics date to 434, contains perhaps the first visualization of the Infancy Gospel narrative, and the first extant example of the Virgin Mary in aristocratic garb.³⁸ In these mosaics, several details of the *Infancy Gospel* narrative are faithfully represented. This mosaic depicts the second part of the Annunciation, when the angel appears to Mary as she is spinning [Figure 19]. Mary sits in a chair, holding the red and “true purple” threads with which she spins the veil for the temple, as the *Infancy Gospel* describes her. She is surrounded not only by Gabriel, but also by several other angels who serve as a visual transition to the adjacent scene. The stream runs in the background, an element conceived as secondary to Mary’s presentation as a virtuous woman.³⁹ She is dressed in tokens of wealth and upper-class style, as the text describes her. This specific

³⁷ Hock, 11, referencing Celsus’ *True Doctrine*.

³⁸ For further information on the Santa Maria Maggiore program, see S. Spain, ““The Promised Blessing”: The Iconography of the Mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore,” in *The Art Bulletin* 61, No. 4 (1979), 518-540.

³⁹ The spinning woman is a visual type of virtue, after the description of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31: 13,19; “she selects wool and flax and works with eager hands [...] in her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.” At least one figural sarcophagus published in Lawrence (1970) depicts Mary spinning during the Annunciation.

representation of her dress is a multiple-layered costume that is similar to Mary's costume in the Milan Diptych: an overgarment that falls to the knee, displaying a vertical sash and an undergarment of rich folded drapery, belted at the waist with an ornate belt. She also wears her hair up, in a sophisticated coiffure with a jeweled tiara. Mary Houston, scholar of costume and ornament, describes this garb as a style of court dress that is simultaneously Roman and Byzantine; Roman, in the sash-like wrap of the *palla* over the *colobium* undergarment, and Byzantine in its lavish use of ornament.⁴⁰

This dress is not solely reserved for the Virgin Mary; several biblical women in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaics also display this type of garb. It is worn by the bride in two scenes of marriage, that of Jacob to Rachel and Moses to Zipporah. It is the clothing worn by Pharaoh's daughter as she accepts the infant Moses into her household. It is also present in some difficult-to-identify scenes frequently associated with Mary; one scene identified by Hugo Brandenburg as the Meeting of David, Isaiah, and Christ, and an even more ambiguous scene around the enthroned Christ-child.⁴¹ Here, the aristocratic dress represents both the wealth and the purity of its wearers—the wealth of Pharaoh's daughter, the purity of the Virgin Mary and her virginal forebears Rachel and Zipporah.

⁴⁰ M. Houston, *Ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Costume and Decoration* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1947), 142. The ornament is more prominent in the Sant' Apollinare Nuovo and Milan Diptych depictions, which occur over a century later.

⁴¹ S. Spain, "'The Promised Blessing': The Iconography of the Mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore," in *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 4 (1979): 520. See also H. Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome From the Fourth to the Seventh Century* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 176-189. The latter scene depicts an enthroned Christ-child between a woman in golden aristocratic garb and a woman in a blue tunic and *maphorion*-like veil. Both are established costumes for Mary from different iconographic traditions. It is unlikely that the two women are both meant to represent her. Spain, in "The Restorations of the Sta. Maria Maggiore Mosaics," *The Art Bulletin* 65 no. 2 (June 1983): 328, has since identified the woman in gold as Sarah and the woman in blue as Mary, but her interpretation also has been considered tenuous.

This Annunciation at Santa Maria Maggiore provides one potential source for the Milan Diptych iconography, but although the diptych's creator uses a similar mode of dress for his representation of the Virgin Mary when she is shown as a betrothed young girl, he does not retain any of the other hallmarks of the Santa Maria Maggiore composition. The Milan Diptych visualizes the Annunciation by the Stream rather than the Annunciation that occurs while Mary is spinning. The Santa Maria Maggiore Annunciation may therefore have been *an* iconographic source for the Milan Diptych Annunciation, but it was probably not *the* source because the scene composition is so dissimilar.

The only other extant image that might have functioned as a source for the Milan Diptych's Aristocratic Mary—indeed, the only other place in which this aristocratic dress is documented before the eighth century—is Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.⁴² This mosaic procession, added by Justinian in the second half of the sixth century to the building's existing mosaic program, depicts twenty-two virgin martyrs on the nave wall who process toward the enthroned Virgin and Child bearing leafy crowns of martyrdom [Figure 16].⁴³ Three sumptuously dressed Magi, also bearing gifts, lead the procession. The Sant' Apollinare Nuovo mosaics were created almost two centuries after the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaics; the costume is thus remarkably similar, but not

⁴² Houston, 144, cites two seventh- and eighth-century representations of women wearing similar dress styles as evidence for the long-lasting tradition of this iconography in Italian aristocratic and Byzantine imperial circles. These are fully Byzantine in aesthetic and therefore intricacies of drapery are greatly simplified in favor of pattern and ornament, but they are still easily recognizable as the same style. Because of their late date, however, they bear little relevance to this study.

⁴³ Mary, as pictured enthroned with the Christ-child, is dressed in a blue tunic and *maphorion*. This part of the mosaic survives from Sant' Apollinare Nuovo's fifth-century Arian mosaic program, and therefore it is not from the same time period as the virgin martyrs.

exactly the same. Stylistic elements of the Byzantine aesthetic, such as a flattened perspective that emphasizes rich pattern over sculptural drapery, are evident in the gold pattern and embellished hem that has been added to the virgin martyrs' *pallae*. This detail supports a connection to the Milan Diptych more solidly than do the preceding mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore. The Milan Diptych's Aristocratic Mary also bears the strongly embellished hem of the Sant' Apollinare Nuovo Virgins, where Santa Maria Maggiore's Aristocratic Mary wears a solid gold, sparsely ornamented *palla*.

The women in the Sant' Apollinare Nuovo procession are a line of virgin martyrs—such as Saints Agnes, Agatha, and Pelagia—who died during the third- and fourth-century persecutions of Decius and Diocletian. Accounts of these women—mostly young girls, as Mary would have been—known from writings such as St Ambrose's *De virginibus* testify that they were revered perhaps more highly for their moral purity than for their devotion to Christ in the face of death.⁴⁴ As in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaics, aristocratic dress functions in these mosaics as an indicator of both wealth and purity. Clothing the Virgin Mary in such robes in the earlier scenes of her life, as a betrothed young girl, places her amongst the company of other exemplary virgins in Christian history, as well as in a specific political and social class of people. St Agatha, in particular, was believed to be the daughter of a distinguished family in Sicily. That both Mary and the Sant' Apollinare virgin martyrs are cast in the robes of wealthy Roman/Byzantine women, in a city where the extant mosaic programs of every structure concern themselves in some way with the political hegemony of either Theodoric or Justinian, may also suggest that they are being linked to the aristocracy

⁴⁴ Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, in *Ambrose: Selected Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, online edition; particularly Chapter 7 which discusses St Pelagia.

and inner circle of the ruler. This indicates that the Milan Diptych's imagery may also contain didactic and symbolic commentary on authority and moral responsibility, of which the wealthy imperial rulers that commissioned many of the monuments at Ravenna would have wanted to show their understanding.

I suggest that Mary's attire in the Milan Diptych is not only a reference to the *Infancy Gospel of James*, but also a clue to the didactic and symbolic function of the diptych as a whole. Mary's aristocratic dress communicates two things to the contemporary viewer of the Milan Diptych. First, her dress is indicative of upper class interests in the commissioning of the diptych and the formulation of its iconographic program. Traditional Nativity and Annunciation imagery provided the exemplar for the standard blue-tunic-garbed Virgin Mary in these scenes. But, by expressly choosing the apocryphal image source for Mary's scenes as a betrothed young girl, the creators of the Milan Diptych show interest in representing Mary as part of the upper class, which consequently creates an image of aristocratic participation in the gospel narrative. Second, the style of this aristocratic dress is most similar to the late sixth-century mosaics of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, although precedents also occur in fifth-century Rome. Additional connections in the Milan Diptych to sixth-century Ravennate architectural structures, as well as the methods by which the imperial family represented themselves as participating in religious life, are explored in Chapter Three.

Understanding meaning and symbolism in the Milan Diptych, particularly when suggesting Ravennate origin and imperial patronage, requires knowledge of political and theological events in the tumultuous century surrounding the creation of the diptych and its architectural *comparanda*. Because of the continuous exchange of images and

themes between architectural mosaics and portable art objects in the city of Ravenna, an exploration of the likelihood of my hypotheses necessitates a broad investigation of Ravenna's other monuments, as patronage of one would be inextricably connected to patronage of the other. In the next section I lay out Ravenna's architectural monuments and political personalities in their historic context as a framework for exploring further the evidence that supports my hypotheses of date, location, and patronage for the Milan Diptych.

Ravenna in the Age of Justinian

The monuments that stand in Ravenna today are scant testimony to the wealth, influence, and prosperity the city experienced during its cultural and economic height in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁴⁵ The city experienced multiple changes of government and religion, and the various monuments commissioned by or in honor of the various ruling administrations are the physical testimony of its colorful history. For the purposes of analyzing artistic patronage, I divide Ravenna's architectural history into three periods: 1) Roman Orthodox rule (424-476), which began with Galla Placidia's return to Ravenna and included her regency and the reign of her son, Valentinian; 2) Ostrogothic Arian rule (476-540), which encompassed the rule of Odoacer and Theodoric; 3) Byzantine Orthodox rule (540-onward), which began with the re-conquering of the peninsula by Justinian and its re-establishment as Orthodox. Significant structures were

⁴⁵ Information about Ravenna's monuments and history presented in this section has been drawn from various guides to the city, specifically G. Bustacchini, *Ravenna: Capital of Mosaic* (Ravenna: Cartolibreria Salbaroli, 1988) and Giuseppe Bovini, *Ravenna* (London: Abrams, 1987). Dates and bishops have been drawn from Agnellus, *The Book of the Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*, trans. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

erected in all three periods, but some mosaic programs with conflicting political or religious messages were changed under the following ruler. In all three periods, the ruling class had themselves represented in the architectural mosaic programs and in the liturgical objects they commissioned. Thus, the primary visual sources of the city are inscribed with political, social, and theological meaning based their patronage, and they establish a pattern of imperial self-representation that is helpful in analyzing the possibility of imperial patronage of the Milan Diptych.

The earliest monuments in Ravenna were commissioned during the regency of Galla Placidia, several of which she funded herself. The earliest mosaic ornamentation is in the so-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, built and ornamented from 425-26 after her return from Constantinople. Its mosaic program establishes several themes that reappear in later mosaic programs in the city: the cross suspended in a starry blue sky, the four evangelist symbols, birds and hinds drinking from vessels, and vegetal motifs. Around the same time, Galla commissioned the Basilica of St. John the Evangelist as a vow to God fulfilled for deliverance from a perilous sea journey. The mosaics of this church, which are no longer extant, contained representations of Galla Placidia, her immediate family, and a lineage of emperors and empresses in its apse which bore the inscription: "Confirm, God, that which you have accomplished for us; from your temple in Jerusalem, kings offer you gifts."⁴⁶ Galla commissioned several other churches during her stay in Ravenna, but the mosaic programs in these two give the most insight into this particular study. The Orthodox Baptistry was also erected during the early fifth century, but its elaborate mosaic program was not added until circa 450, under Bishop Neon. No representation of the ruling administration is present here; however,

⁴⁶ Agnellus, 151.

its mosaic program is significant because it is the first to establish the circular procession of apostles carrying martyrs' crowns of victory which is repeated in subsequent architecture and sarcophagi.

Most of the extant monuments at Ravenna were begun under Arian rule, though several were modified afterwards. The Arian Baptistery, built sometime between Arian conquest in 476 and Theodoric's architectural commissions in 500, repeats in simplified form the processional motif of the Orthodox baptistery.⁴⁷ This structure is almost contemporary with the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, which was erected by Theodoric in the first quarter of the sixth century. It sat next to Theodoric's palace and functioned as the Palatine Chapel. Its interior mosaics include a representation of his palace and the personalities at Theodoric's court, though the figures were erased after the demise of Arian rule, and veiled architectural niches are the only remaining testimony of the previous administration. Sant' Apollinare Nuovo contains the most complicated layering of Ravenna's mosaic programs. The mosaics of the upper storeys—the miracles of Christ and the scenes of his Passion,⁴⁸ static prophets, and two enthroned images (one of the Virgin and Child, the other of a grown Christ)—were created during Theodoric's time and still survive. Evidently the rest of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo's mosaic program was judged by Justinian too divisive to remain; the processions that fill the lower storey are a late sixth-century replacement, and the original mosaic program is unrecorded.

⁴⁷ The central image on the domed ceiling of both baptisteries is the Baptism of Christ, which appears in the same iconographic form, although somewhat simplified, in the Milan Diptych.

⁴⁸ This includes the Widow's Mite scene, a very rare image in early Christian art, which is discussed in Chapter Three in context of the Milan Diptych Widow's Mite scene.

The Arch-Episcopal Chapel was also commissioned and completed under Theodoric's rule, though there is no indication that its mosaic program is particularly Arian. Bishop Peter II (494-520) built and ornamented this structure as a private chapel for the bishops of Ravenna. Its apse contains a cross in a starry sky motif similar to the one established at Galla Placidia's Mausoleum.⁴⁹ The four evangelist symbols are also repeated in this small space.

The last significant buildings begun under Arian rule are the Basilicas of San Vitale and Sant' Apollinare in Classe, financed by a Ravennate banker named Julian and overseen by Bishop Ecclesius. These structures did not acquire their glittering mosaic programs until the mid-sixth century, after Justinian had recaptured Ravenna in 540 and made it the base of Byzantine rule in Italy. It is thus more accurate to label these structures as Byzantine Orthodox than Arian, since they contain images of Justinian and his court. Bishop Maximian dedicated San Vitale in 547 and Sant' Apollinare in Classe in 549. Both churches make use of the symbolic vocabulary of jeweled crosses, lambs, vegetation, and rivers discussed in Chapter One. San Vitale also contains images of Justinian and Theodora participating in the Eucharist, led by Bishop Maximian, and a massive Christ Enthroned sitting on a celestial orb, conferring the crown of martyrdom on Saint Vitalis and receiving the Church of San Vitale from Bishop Maximian. In an attempt to cleanse the city of its Arian history, Maximian also re-dedicated the Arch-Episcopal Chapel to St. Andrew, and, at Justinian's behest, changed half of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo's mosaic program in 561. It is uncertain

⁴⁹ The Arch-Episcopal Chapel mosaics have been heavily restored, but Bovini, 58, records that at the time of restoration, enough of the previous mosaic remained for an accurate reconstruction.

whether these mosaics were eradicated on theological grounds or simply because images of the ousted Ostrogoth dynasty had no place in a Byzantine-controlled Ravenna. In either case, the twin processions of virgins and martyrs are Byzantine adaptations of the crown processions seen in the Arian and Orthodox baptisteries. Like the Justinian and Theodora panels at San Vitale, the style of these mosaics is flatter than its predecessors, its textile patterns are more elaborate, and its perspective is slightly skewed—all details that usher in the Medieval Byzantine aesthetic.

Though the Arian heresy embodied one of the most defining moments in the history of the Christian church (and of Western Europe), in the context of the Milan Diptych and Ravenna mosaics, politics outweigh religion. Nearly identical imagery in the Arian and Orthodox baptisteries testifies that the same symbols and thematic narratives were applied indiscriminately in both structures. In analyzing the Milan Diptych, trying to identify the object as either Orthodox or Arian is less productive than analyzing the statements of political and spiritual authority embodied in this type of object. *The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna* and the mosaic programs of Ravenna both testify that a ruler's self-representation in commissioned buildings or liturgical objects was important. Political personalities Galla Placidia, Theodoric, and Justinian all recorded visual testimonies of their rule in the architecture and liturgical objects they commissioned. The evidence I present in the following chapter supports a solid hypothesis, on iconographic grounds, for a late-sixth century date for the Milan Diptych. It also supports the hypothesis that the Milan Diptych was an imperial commission.

In previous scholarship, the Milan Diptych has most frequently been dated to the second half of the fifth century. Here I argue that it is impossible to understand the complexities of patronage and imperial reference in the Milan Diptych without the sixth-century political power structures and relationships already in place, and in the following chapter, I explain why it is most likely that the Milan Diptych was commissioned by Justinian himself during the period of profuse artistic activity that he spearheaded in the second half of the sixth century.

CHAPTER III. THE DISCOURSE OF POWER: HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY AUTHORITY IN THE MILAN DIPTYCH

The idea that the Milan Diptych may have been an imperial commission is not wholly unprecedented. Both Volbach and Spier have assumed a North Italian provenance for the diptych and attributed it to an imperial workshop due to its rich ornamentation and metalwork techniques.⁵⁰ Specifically, the special method of garnet cloisonné enameling on the Agnus Dei cover has been linked to contemporary practice in Constantinople.⁵¹ In their iconographic arrangements and constructed meanings, the narrative scenes on both covers contain information that, I suggest, allows for a more specific attribution of provenance, date, and patronage. In this chapter, I argue for three conclusions for which the narrative scenes of the Milan Diptych present strong evidence: first, that the Milan Diptych was made in Ravenna for a Ravennate audience; second, that it was commissioned by a member of the imperial court, possibly the emperor, as an ecclesiastical gift; and third, that it was wrought during a prolific period of imperially-sponsored artistic patronage shortly following Justinian's conquest of Ravenna.

⁵⁰ Volbach, 84, Spier, 256-258.

⁵¹ Spier, 258. See also B. Arrhenius, *Merovingian Garnet Jewellery* (Stockholm, 1985): 115-20.

Imperial Imagery in the Milan Diptych

The word “imperial” can have several connotations in the context of Christian art. The relationship between the early Church and the imperial cult has been a contested issue in art historical scholarship, as there has been much debate about whether the earliest images of Christ were meant to appropriate or to subvert imperial visual prototypes.⁵² Although this is one important aspect of imperial reference in Early Christian art, the most important issue for art of the fifth and sixth centuries is not whether Christ was being depicted after the manner of the emperor, but rather, how the Christian emperor envisioned himself in relation to Christ. More generally, what did imperially-sponsored religious art—such as the mosaics in San Vitale and Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, and the Milan Diptych—declare about the relationship between earthly authority and heavenly authority?

The Milan Diptych contains sixteen narrative scenes from the Lives of Christ and the Virgin. All but two of the scenes feature an active character raising one arm in a demonstrative gesture of pointing, blessing, or healing. It is the gesture by which the angel Gabriel seizes Mary’s attention, by which Herod decrees the murder of Bethlehem’s male children under two years of age, and by which Christ performs all his miracles. Considering the diptych in purely formal terms, this gesture serves to unify a dense mass of narratives into a harmonious composition. Considered interpretively, its repeated use signifies meaningful content in the diptych, perhaps even a didactic function. Hand gestures were highly important signifiers in sarcophagi, apse paintings, and early Medieval Bible illumination; they conveyed spiritual status—acceptance or

⁵² T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: 1993), 39-45.

rejection, blessing or curse—and also serve as the driving force of the narrative.⁵³ By using the same gesture in scenes of miracles as well as massacres, the diptych artfully sets up Christ and Herod as foils for each other, and the similarity in scene composition heightens the contrast in meaning between the pictures of two rulers. Four of these scenes stand out from the rest because they carry themes of authority that might be relevant to the suggestion of imperial patronage, and thus deserve closer analysis. The Massacre of the Innocents, Christ Among the Doctors, the Entry into Jerusalem, and the Widow's Mite scenes each reference earthly authority, heavenly authority, or set up some relationship between the two. Parallel gesture and seating position in these scenes sets up a division between properly and improperly used authority, particularly in the Massacre of the Innocents and the Widow's Mite.

The first scene envisions the story recounted in Matthew 2:16, when Herod, the Jewish king, attempted to stamp out the Messiah by ordering the murder of Jewish male children under two years of age. The Milan Diptych scene depicts the decree being given and carried out in the same frame. Herod is seated on an open-backed Roman throne, swathed in the military costume of a Roman emperor [Figure 1]. He is surrounded by soldiers with swords and shields, two of which wrest babies from the arms of distraught women. The mothers' pathos is in stark contrast to Herod's stoic, stiff figure, his hand is raised in military decree. Herod's seated position in this compound narrative is significant because it indicates his position of authority; he and

⁵³ See Verkerk, 121-123. In early Christian iconography of the Last Judgment, meaning in the image is wholly dependant upon Christ's gesture—his right hand lowered in acceptance of the sheep, and his left hand raised in rejection of the goats. Similar gestures were used in typological readings of Old Testament events to convey spiritual status, such as the acceptance of Jacob and rejection of Esau, which Verkerk discusses as they are represented in the Ashburnham Pentateuch.

his entourage are set before the murder scene to remind the viewer that he instigated the decree and sits in judgment over it. This format is repeated with a visual parallel in the scene of the Widow's Mite. In this narrative, Christ sits enthroned on a starry orb, presiding over the scene from a removed location as he witnesses a poor widow place her last two pennies into the temple offering box [Figure 2]. In the biblical account, Christ's exaltation of her guileless offering is a judgment upon the callous religious leaders, who gave only portions of their wealth and remained hardened in their hearts. In the Milan Diptych, Christ's seated position on the celestial orb is a theological reference to his heavenly throne in the context of eternal judgment. It is also a direct visual quote of a local image—this concept as envisioned in the apse of the Basilica of San Vitale [Figure 12]. Thus, the gesture and seated position of Herod and Christ in the Massacre of the Innocents and the Widow's Mite scenes, respectively, may be read as the just heavenly judgment issued by Christ contrasted with the unjust earthly judgment issued by Herod—both of which deal with marginalized people such as widows and children—depicted with reference to local iconographic images of heavenly authority.

The parallel gestures echoed in these positions of authority set up a visual dichotomy for the viewer of acceptable and unacceptable use of power. The scenes of Christ Among the Doctors⁵⁴ and the Entry into Jerusalem⁵⁵ also utilize the gesture of blessing/decreed in tandem with the positional authority conveyed through seating [Figure 1]. In Christ Among the Doctors, a twelve-year old Christ sits upon a stepped, solid throne (perhaps more reminiscent of ecclesiastical seating than imperial) and gestures decisively toward a Jewish religious leader, who drops his book in awe and

⁵⁴ Luke 2:41-51.

⁵⁵ Matthew 21:1-11.

revelation. Christ Among the Doctors references the earliest non-apocryphal recorded moment of Christ's childhood, when his parents accidentally left him in Jerusalem. Luke chronicles that when they returned, they found him sitting in the temple, amazing the temple lawyers with his understanding of scripture. In this scene, the gesture conveys knowledge, revelation, and teaching authority in ecclesiastical and spiritual matters. Directly below Christ Among the Doctors, the Entry into Jerusalem scene presents a much more earthly picture of acceptable, welcomed authority. In this scene, Christ is lauded by the people of Jerusalem as the Messiah, their future King. The Milan Diptych envisions this as a triumphal procession; Christ grasps the reins and raises his arm in the same blessing motion as Herod below, while the donkey on which he rides—a humble steed in the textual account—is given ennobled equestrian characteristics under the weight of glory of the King of Kings.

This depiction is remarkable and meaningful because it is a rare instance where Christ is not seated sidesaddle.⁵⁶ Traditional depictions of the Entry into Jerusalem, seen in the lower register of the Saint-Lupicin Diptych and in the sixth-century Rossano Gospels, depict Christ in this more passive position, which has been interpreted as a conscious visual subversion of the imperial type [Figure 4]. In these images, the Entry into Jerusalem is not cast as an imperial triumph, but rather, Christ's humility is emphasized by placing him in a "feminine," passive position. Scholars believe this visual choice was made to emphasize that Christ is not an earthly ruler (or even like an

⁵⁶ Mathews, 39-45, interprets the multiple sidesaddle images of Christ in the Entry into Jerusalem as an early Christian attempt to visually distinguish the peaceful Christ, whose seated stance is modeled after philosophers, from the Emperor and his pompous *adventus*. That Christ is not sidesaddle in the Milan Diptych does not necessarily undermine Mathews' conclusion, but rather suggests that visual parallels between posture and gesture were more important within this particular piece.

earthly ruler), but rather that he operates in a heavenly domain, presiding over spiritual matters. I believe the Milan Diptych diverges from this established tradition in order to make this scene fit the already-established foil of gesture, and so make the kingship of Christ a more visually pronounced contrast to the kingship of Herod. Additionally, I believe this regal posture and gesture suggest that the creator of the diptych is drawing upon imperial imagery for visual sources. Most recent scholarship on the Milan Diptych has emphasized the dual nature of Christ—his humanity and divinity—as the diptych’s primary theological program.⁵⁷ While this is a valid reading of the diptych, it does not represent the fullness of the diptych’s complex program of meaning. These imperial visual sources carry with them messages that would endow the diptych’s theological subject with additional political meaning. A complete reading of the diptych, therefore, must consider political as well as theological themes.

This contrast between two kingships—earthly and heavenly—is further emphasized by Herod’s Roman military garb. Herod is dressed in the short tunic, cuirass, and *paludamentum* of Roman army generals, which is also an imperial type as seen in the first-century propagandistic sculpture Augustus of Prima Porta.⁵⁸ Clothing the scene’s antagonist in imperial robes may seem incongruous to the proposition that the Milan Diptych was an imperial commission, but the open-backed throne on which Herod sits gives further clues to the interpretive context of such a dress and seating choice. Herod is dressed in the military costume of the Augustan past, not in

⁵⁷ Spier, 256-258, interprets the Agnus Dei and Wreath Cover, which contains scenes of Christ’s birth and childhood, as an emphasis on his humanity; correspondingly, the Cross cover, which contains miracles and scenes from his heavenly throne, emphasizes his divinity.

⁵⁸ Houston, 101-102.

contemporary Byzantine imperial attire, which is modeled by Justinian in the San Vitale Panels. In contrast to Herod's cuirass, short-sleeved tunic, and plain rectangular *paludamentum*, Justinian wears a long-sleeved tunic with *hosa* (tights), no cuirass, and a *paludamentum* of a different type: semicircular in shape and ornamented with an embroidered panel called a *tablion*, an important feature of male court dress from the fifth through the tenth centuries in Byzantium [Figure 8a].⁵⁹ Correspondingly, the throne on which Herod sits is characteristic of Roman thrones from the first century rather than contemporary Italian or Byzantine thrones. The Gemma Augustae and a bronze statuette of an enthroned female figure give examples of the traditional Roman throne that seated both Roman emperors and Roman gods: rectangular, after the manner of contemporary chairs, with planks across the open back, and knobs at the tops of the posts [Figure 20].⁶⁰ Contemporary Italian and Byzantine thrones, such as the lyre-backed throne on which Christ sits in the Sant' Apollinare Nuovo mosaics, and the lyre-backed throne in a mosaic of Christ Enthroned from Hagia Sophia suggests that the model in Byzantium-influenced Italy for a contemporary imperial throne possessed a curved, solid back rather than a straight, open one [Figure 21].⁶¹

Portraying Herod on an open-backed throne and in military attire that resembles Augustan Rome more than the Christian Empire suggests that Herod is being cast as a type of past pagan emperors. This strategy utilizes the temporal distance between the pagan Empire and Christian empire. Herod functions as a former example of the

⁵⁹ Houston, 136.

⁶⁰ See C. Vermeule, "Roman Art," in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994): 62-77.

⁶¹ See J. Breckenridge, "Christ on the Lyre-Backed Throne," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34 (1980-81), 247-260.

wrongful use of power in order to serve as a foil for Christ, and, by implication, for the Christian emperor who submits himself to Christ. Such a visual choice, therefore, is not a derogatory comment toward the office of emperor, but rather a contrast between wrongly-used authority and rightly-used authority. Herod's domain is the earth, but Christ, his foil, displays righteous use of authority in both earth and heaven: he demonstrates spiritual knowledge and discernment (Christ Among the Doctors), he brings peace to the city (Entry into Jerusalem), and from his throne in heaven, he pronounces a blessing on the guileless offerings of the poor (Widow's Mite). Interpreted thus, the primary goal of the Milan Diptych is to exalt Christ as the model for a righteous ruler, rather than to denigrate imperial office as inherently corrupt. This establishes a distance between previous emperors who persecuted the gospel and the present emperor who acknowledges, even submits to Christ's rule. The Enthroned Christ in Hagia Sophia is an example of the direction toward which the Byzantine conception of the relationship between heavenly and earthly authority was developing: Christ, positioned in the Byzantine emperor's lyre-backed throne, is adored by a prostrate, fully submissive emperor [Figure 21].

Christ's seated position in these scenes of authority, rule, and judgment is noteworthy, both in the Milan Diptych, Ravennate sarcophagi, and local architectural mosaics. Traditional iconography dictates that Christ is standing while performing miracles, and only sitting when enthroned. The Saint-Lupicin and Murano book covers contain iconic portraits of Christ as their central images, seated frontally on a throne and dictating a gesture of blessing. On the same diptychs, Christ is presented standing, in twisted perspective or in profile, while performing any type of narrative action, such as

turning water to wine or raising Lazarus from the dead. The numerous depictions of the seated Christ on the Milan Diptych, on sarcophagi, and in architectural mosaics suggest a theological meaning that pervades the art of Ravenna regardless of media. Ambrose, Father of the Church and Bishop of Milan, a city that was closely connected to Ravenna in the years before the fall of Rome, writes of the symbolic meaning of the seated posture in his epistle to the church at Vercellae:

Let Him then be standing for you, that you may not be afraid of Him sitting; *for when sitting He judges*, as Daniel says: "The thrones were placed, and the books were opened, and the Ancient of days did sit." But in the eighty-first [second] Psalm it is written: "God stood in the congregation of gods, and decideth among the gods." So then *when He sits He judges*, when He stands He decides, and He judges concerning the imperfect, but decides among the gods. Let Him stand for you as a defender, as a good shepherd, lest the fierce wolves assault you.⁶²

Ambrose's powerful words suggest a didactic warning implicit in the diptych to those in positions of earthly power. With this teaching in mind, the image of Christ seated on the celestial orb in the Milan Diptych's hybrid *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns image, and its quoted source in the Basilica of San Vitale, becomes a display of heavenly judgment from outside the realm of time.⁶³ By including images of both Christ and an earthly ruler in seated positions of authority, the Milan Diptych contrasts heavenly hegemony with earthly hegemony.

In conclusion, the narrative selection of the Milan Diptych is framed to speak to a Ravennate audience about heavenly and earthly power and authority, and the right relationship between them. It does this by utilizing the established iconographic

⁶² Ambrose, in "Epistle LXIII: To the Church at Vercellae," in *Ambrose: Selected Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh, U.K.: T & T Clark), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 457, emphasis mine.

⁶³ In San Vitale, the scene presented is the preparation for the Last Judgment, for Christ holds a scroll with seven seals that are yet to be opened.

arrangements in Ravennate sarcophagi and architectural mosaics. Additionally, the numerous references to earthly power and the quotations of imperial imagery in both positive and negative contexts support the suggestion that the Milan Diptych is an imperial commission.

The Evolution of the Traditio Legis at Ravenna

The scenes discussed above make a strong case for imperial commission because of their underlying themes of power and authority. By far the strongest image of power and authority in the Milan Diptych is the scene that has been traditionally identified as the *Traditio Legis*, which occurs in the top right position on the Cross cover [Figure 22]. Like the Widow's Mite, the compositional arrangement of this so-called *Traditio Legis* quotes the Basilica of San Vitale (among other architectural mosaics in the city), which solidly supports a provenance of Ravenna for the Milan Diptych. The quoted images, however, are not *Traditio Legis* images; rather, they depict the giving and receiving of crowns as described in Revelation 4, one of the most prominent themes in the Ravennate visual repertoire. Therefore, this scene on the Milan Diptych may be more accurately identified as a hybrid *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns image, synthesizing *Traditio Legis* representations on Ravennate sarcophagi with the exchange of crowns depicted on Ravennate architectural mosaics. The Ravennate *Traditio Legis* possessed distinctly different characteristics from its Roman counterpart, and thus warrants further study in relation to the Milan Diptych.

The earliest *Traditio Legis* images were secular in nature, depicting the emperor as lawgiver, offering a scroll to his subjects as exemplified in the fourth-century

Missorium of Theodosius. The image was appropriated for Christian art and recast as Christ handing down spiritual authority to Peter and Paul.⁶⁴ As such, these images were theological statements about apostolic succession, dealing with power and authority in the church. Though the *Traditio Legis* was the most common, a variant arrangement, the *Traditio Clavium*, was also circulating amongst imperial and aristocratic circles. This variation depicted Christ handing over the keys of the kingdom to Peter, with (understandably) a stronger emphasis on Peter.⁶⁵ These images appear in architectural mosaics in the funerary complex of Santa Costanza in Rome as well as in local sarcophagi.⁶⁶ The traditional formal composition for both of these arrangements featured Christ dressed in a Roman toga, standing on a mount from which flow the four rivers of Paradise, flanked by palm trees and standing apostles, who climb the mount to reach him, or simply turn toward him to receive the scroll (or keys).⁶⁷

Use of the *Traditio Legis* in Ravenna was frequent, but almost always in modified form. Sarcophagi provide the best examples of this trend. The *Traditio Legis* composition is simplified and set against a blank background; rather than standing,

⁶⁴ Examples of *Traditio Legis* imagery in various media can be found in Spier, *Picturing the Bible*. See also M. Rasmussen, "Traditio Legis?" in *Cahiers Archéologiques* 47 (1997): 5-37 and B. Snelders, "The *Traditio Legis* on Early Christian Sarcophagi," in *Antiquité Tardive* 13 (2005): 321-333.

⁶⁵ An excellent example of the *Traditio Clavium* exists on a silver ewer in the British Museum, reproduced in Spier, 244-245. Peter is poised to receive the keys from Christ, the edge of his robe draped ceremonially over his open hands. Peter's gesture on this ewer is the same as the gesture of the apostles that bear martyr's crowns in the various processions in Ravennate architectural mosaics.

⁶⁶ Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, contains many other objects that bear *Traditio Legis* iconography, such as numerous gold glass medallions of ambiguous usage which contained simplified images of the scene.

⁶⁷ One divergent example, the *Traditio Clavium* in the apse of Santa Costanza, depicts Christ enthroned on the celestial orb, an imperial type found on late antique coinage.

Christ is seated on a throne, in a position of authority. Peter and Paul bear additional Christian symbols popular at Ravenna, such the wreath and the cross. The Rinaldo Sarcophagus and Twelve Apostles Sarcophagus are two examples that embody each of these changes [Figures 14, 15]. They also contain additional apostles that flank the throne carrying martyrs' crowns in a manner that mirrors the processions of the Arian and Orthodox Baptisteries. The significant position of seating is also found on the Pignatta Sarcophagus, which (although not a strict *Traditio Legis* image), still features Christ enthroned between Peter and Paul, treading the lion and cobra under his feet in a position of explicit power and authority.⁶⁸ These modified *Traditio Legis* images always portray Christ sitting on a throne; additionally, they consistently conflate the image of apostolic succession with the imagery of Christ conferring crowns to martyrs who, in turn, present them back to him.

The Milan Diptych's hybrid *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns features a seated Christ enthroned upon a star-studded celestial orb, blessing the martyrs' crowns that two apostles, presumably Peter and Paul, present to him. This composition is entirely unlike Roman models—which feature a standing Christ and do not reference the Conferral of Crowns—and on such basis, could not be identified as a *Traditio Legis*. The similarity between the diptych scene and the Ravennate *Traditio Legis*, however, indicate that the Milan Diptych image was indeed modeled after this scene of ecclesiastical authority, which had been, in turn, modeled after a scene of imperial authority. The star-studded orb also has precedents in imperial secular art; in coinage

⁶⁸ All extant *Traditio Legis* images on Ravennate sarcophagi, with one exception, picture Christ seated on a throne. This exception, on a sarcophagus which resides in the Museo Nazionale, features Christ standing while conferring the law to Peter and Paul. This unnamed sarcophagus is published in Lawrence (1970).

emperors were occasionally pictured seated on orbs, which signified the celestial globe.⁶⁹ It has an additional precedent in the star-studded interior of Galla Placidia's Mausoleum [Figure 6]. Such imperial imagery, together with the pre-existing Ravennate mosaics, were likely the sources for the mosaic apse of San Vitale, which was commissioned by Justinian in the 540's. The Milan Diptych's *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns, which shows apostles casting their crowns before Christ's heavenly throne, directly quotes the San Vitale apse, which shows Christ conferring a crown of martyrdom on Saint Vitalis from the throne of his celestial orb [Figure 12].

The giving of crowns is a circular act in text as well as image; Paul describes Christ conferring crowns to martyrs and Christians who complete the race victoriously; these saints, in Revelation, offer them back to Christ by casting them at the feet of his throne.⁷⁰ Two mosaic commissions, both made under Justinian in the late sixth century, echo this circularity of giving: the enthroned Christ upon the celestial orb of the San Vitale apse, and the Sant' Apollinare Nuovo processions of virgins and martyrs. The Milan Diptych materializes some of this ambiguity between offering and receiving, replicating the suggestion of procession in its square compositional space through a balanced arrangement of figures on either side of frontally-facing Christ. It is unclear whether Christ is conferring the crowns to the apostles or blessing them. As suggested earlier, the seating on the celestial orb suggests a position of authority over the cosmos, situating Christ on his heavenly throne of judgment, outside the realm of time.

Therefore, while the Milan Diptych's *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns contains

⁶⁹ One such example is a medallion of Severus Alexander from third-century Rome, published in Spier, 96.

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:25, Revelation 4:10.

important characteristics of the traditional format, its modifications create an image that downplays apostolic succession and places greater emphasis on the authoritative position of Christ—cast in visual modes of the authoritative emperor—specifically in context of judgment and blessing.

Such a switch—from emphasis on ecclesiastical authority to emphasis on heavenly authority in the picture of the secular ruler—further indicates that the imagery of the Milan Diptych was meant to convey political messages in addition to spiritual ones. The subtle commentary on heavenly and earthly power, and their relationship to one another, is a hallmark of imperial self-representation in public art in Ravenna, particularly under Justinian. It is thus entirely conceivable that the Milan Diptych belongs to the period of prolific commissions in the late sixth century—Justinian’s artistic campaign to wipe out testimony of the previous Arian administration and to establish himself visually at Ravenna as a God-honoring ruler.

Previous rulers, both Orthodox and Arian, included representations of themselves in ecclesiastical buildings, probably to testify to their piety or lend credibility to their administration. Galla Placidia included her entire family in the Basilica of St John the Evangelist and on the walls of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, Theodoric represented himself and his court in the intercolumnations of his sumptuous palace. One of Justinian’s first public acts after conquering Ravenna was to erase this testimony of Arian rule and to replace it with imagery friendly to the Orthodox administration. Justinian also decked the Basilica of San Vitale, which was begun under Arian dominance, with similar imagery that exalted Justinian and Theodora as submissive participants in the heavenly rule of Christ.

In these images, Justinian's self-representation extends beyond the propagandistic scope of previous rulers. Rather than merely documenting his likeness in these structures, as Theodoric presented the members of his court, Justinian presented himself and his empress as participants in the heavenly rule of Christ. He did this by visualizing them as officiants—even leaders—in the Eucharist procession that scholars believe accompanied the consecration of the church.⁷¹ The presentation of an inter-reliant power relationship between Christ and Justinian and Theodora in the San Vitale apse seems to be a strategy unique to Justinian; the seeds of this theme in the Milan Diptych further support Ravennate provenance, a sixth-century dating contemporary with San Vitale and the Sant' Apollinare processions, and Justinian's patronage.

The famous Justinian and Theodora mosaics of San Vitale feature the Byzantine Emperor and Empress bearing bread and wine—Eucharist elements, the very lifeblood of the church—in regal procession through the veil separating sacred and secular space [Figures 8a, 8b]. Positioned both as moving toward and submitted beneath the massive Christ, enthroned on the heavens, the mosaic presents to the public the idea that Justinian and Theodora as political leaders, though symbolically submitted to the heavenly hegemony of Christ, also participate in his authority through their appointed leadership on this earth. This message—“deference, but also participation”—indicates simultaneous submission *to* and participation *in* heavenly authority.

⁷¹ Treadgold, 708. The image could not have depicted an actual event because there are no records that place both Justinian and Theodora, who died in 548, in Ravenna at the same time as Maximian. Some scholars have interpreted Theodora's procession through the veiled, liminal space in the mosaic as indication that she was dead at the time the mosaics were finished. For this reading, see Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1981), 263.

During the years of Justinian's ambitious mosaic re-decoration in Ravenna, he also commissioned smaller liturgical objects for the church at Ravenna. Primary source texts testify that Ravenna enjoyed a place of privilege in the emperor's eyes and was a significant recipient of imperial gifts and commissions. *The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*, written in the eighth century by Bishop Agnellus, documents Justinian's special relationship with Maximian, Bishop of Ravenna. It also records an established tradition of gift-giving by the imperial family, continued by Justinian.⁷² This gift-giving tradition is visually attested by the San Vitale panels. Irina and Warren Treadgold have suggested that the paten and chalice that the couple carries were gifts brought to the church at Ravenna.⁷³ Historian T.S. Brown describes the interesting inter-reliant relationship between the Byzantine emperor, the church at Ravenna, and the Pope in Rome. After conquest of the peninsula, Justinian gave land grants for conquered Arian territories to the bishops of Ravenna, who paid taxes on them to Constantinople. Justinian was thus highly influential in Italian political and ecclesiastical matters through the power he established at Ravenna; Brown even claims that the papacy conformed to his ecclesiastical policies, and that Gregory the Great was in alliance with him.⁷⁴ Correspondingly, Justinian represents himself through mosaic in

⁷² Agnellus, 185-190. He also records that Galla Placidia gave golden candelabra and chalices inscribed with her name to the churches of Ravenna; 124, 149, respectively. Additionally, Justinian gave a gospel book with gold covers and precious jewels to the Bishop of Rome in the early sixth century (514-523), establishing that giving book covers as gifts was not a wholly unprecedented practice for him. R. Davis, trans, *The Book of Pontiffs* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 50.

⁷³ Treadgold, 1.

⁷⁴ T. S. Brown, "The Church of Ravenna and the Imperial Administration in the Seventh Century," in *The English Historical Review* 94, No. 370 (1979), 6-8.

a position of power in both secular and ecclesiastical realms, in close relationship with the bishop, as a giver of gifts, and as a participant in spiritual leadership.

Therefore, in light of its political theme, I propose that the Milan Diptych was commissioned by someone who had reason to acknowledge the supremacy of heavenly power without denigrating earthly authority. Justinian's pattern of self-representation in Ravenna makes him the prime candidate for patronage of the Milan Diptych. The diptych possesses an exaltation of Christ in powerful guise in its *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns scene, and accomplishes this in the same way that the San Vitale apse presents Christ as Lord of all while also exalting Justinian and Theodora as participants in rule under his headship. The diptych emphasizes the supreme heavenly and earthly authority of Christ while also expressing subtle imperial acquiescence to Christ's authority and even participation in his rule. Presenting Mary in the robes of an aristocratic woman further establishes a positive connection to the Byzantine court. An emphasis on female experience through the aristocratic dress of the Virgin and the inclusion of the Widow's Mite scene could indicate female influence in patronage, but this can be little more than speculation, as Theodora died in 548, soon after the consecration of San Vitale.

In the context of Justinian's pattern of artistic commission and self-representation in Ravenna, I propose that this diptych was one of the gifts given by the imperial house to the church at Ravenna. Based on contextual information and visual evidence, I align the Milan Diptych with Justinian's campaign of altering monuments in Ravenna, which began in 540 and flourished after he solidly established control of the peninsula in 561. The Milan Diptych utilizes the same iconography and motifs used in

architectural mosaics made during this period, such as the enthroned Christ in the San Vitale apse and the aristocratic dress of the virgins' procession in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo. The Milan Diptych also possesses references to political and spiritual power in local iconographic language that would be relevant in a gift from a political leader to an ecclesiastical congregation.

CONCLUSION

The Milan Diptych has previously been assigned to a North Italian workshop (with suggestions of Milan or Ravenna), in the fifth century, as an imperial commission. I have investigated these attributions and concluded that the Milan Diptych is most likely a product of Ravenna, in the late sixth century, commissioned by Justinian during the campaign of artistic renovation that he instigated circa 561. I have used symbolism, composition of iconographic scenes, details of dress, and constructions of meaning in the narrative as the primary evidence for these conclusions.

Chapter One demonstrated that the Milan Diptych contains the same symbolic vocabulary and conventions of representation as the architectural mosaics of Ravennate churches and the sarcophagi made in Ravennate workshops—details that distinguish the diptych from contemporary ivory book covers produced elsewhere in the empire. The Milan Diptych also contains several iconographic elements, such as the Agnus Dei with fruit-bearing wreath and the rarely represented Widow's Mite scene, that are found only in Ravenna.

Chapter Two linked the aristocratic dress of the Virgin Mary in the Milan Diptych to an apocryphal tradition derived from the *Infancy Gospel of James*, which represents Mary as a figure who is wealthy, pure, and a member of the aristocratic class. The closest exemplar to Mary's garb in the Milan Diptych is the procession of virgin martyrs from the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, which was added

through the commission of Emperor Justinian after 561. I demonstrated that Mary's aristocratic dress in the Milan Diptych is representative of upper-class interests in commissioning the diptych, and should be seen in the context of the political themes embodied in gesture and scene selection elsewhere in the diptych.

Chapter Three examined these political themes and demonstrated that the gestures and seating positions in the Milan Diptych were carefully crafted in order to contrast wrongfully-used earthly power with rightly-used heavenly power. I showed that the Milan Diptych's *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns, which is also a commentary on power and authority, was composed from pre-existing visual compositions in the Arian and Orthodox Baptisteries and the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna. This established that the Milan Diptych could only have been commissioned after the middle of the sixth century, when San Vitale's mosaics were being completed. I also showed that the manner in which the diptych presented the relationship of earthly authority to heavenly authority conformed to Justinian's manner of representing his own authority in the San Vitale mosaics. I concluded that the Milan Diptych was most likely commissioned by Justinian for a Ravennate ecclesiastical audience that would have been familiar with the references to local architectural mosaics in the diptych. As such a gift, the Milan Diptych functioned as visual promotion for the Byzantine administration as it was composed in specific visual language for a specific audience. This thesis presents a more nuanced understanding of this well-known object in light of the political and social factors surrounding its creation.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Milan Diptych (Agnus Dei cover), late sixth century, ivory and silver with inlaid garnet, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 11", Treasury of the Cathedral of Milan, Italy.



Figure 2. Milan Diptych (Cross cover), late sixth century, ivory and silver with precious stones, 14¾" x 11", Treasury of the Cathedral of Milan, Italy.

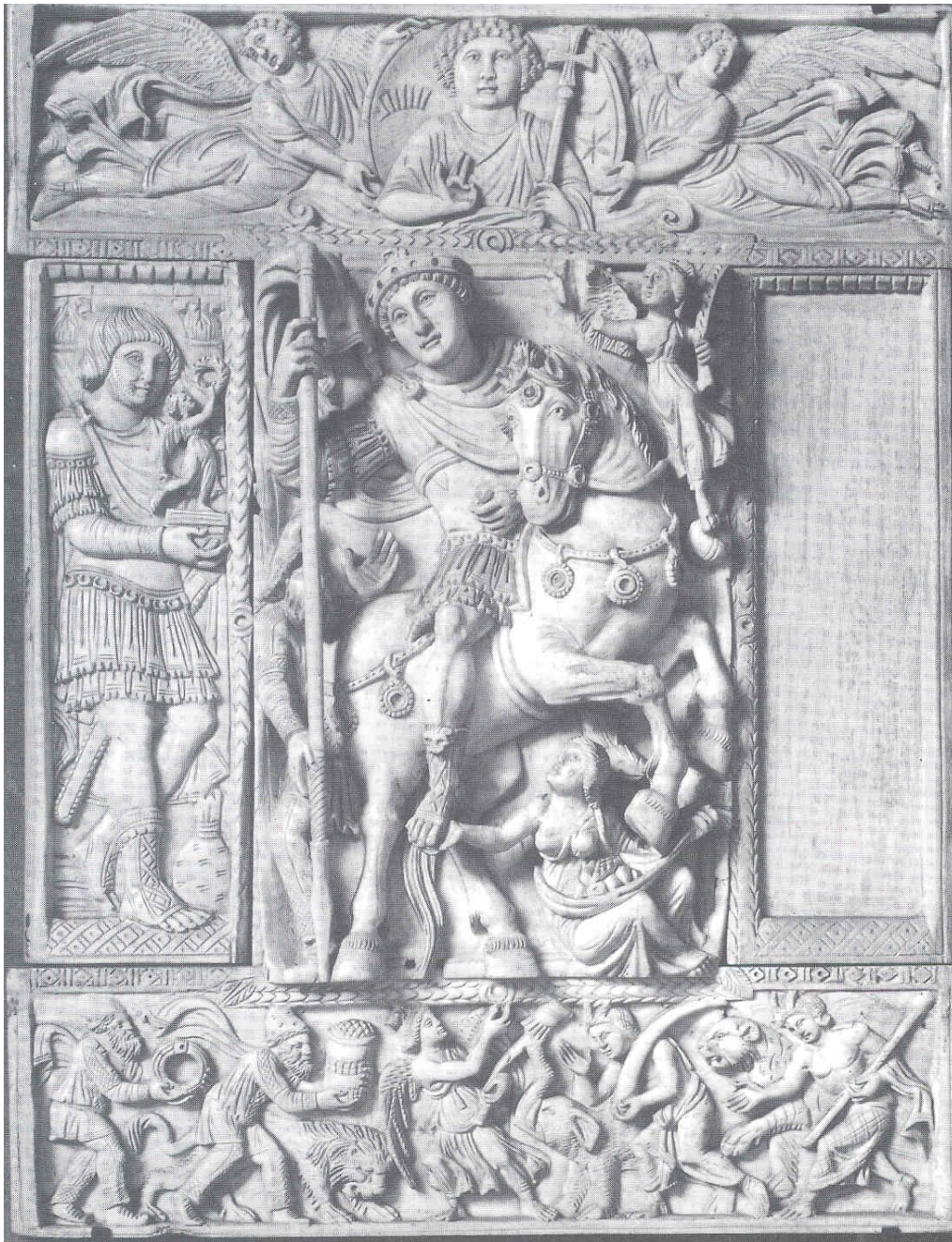


Figure 3. Barberini Ivory, 500-520, ivory, 13½" x 10½", Louvre, Paris.



Figure 4. Saint-Lupicin Diptych, 550-600, ivory, 16" x 12½", Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.



Figure 5. Murano Diptych, 510-530, ivory, 14" x 12", Museo Nazionale, Ravenna.



Figure 6. Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, 425-426, mosaic.



Figure 7. Arian Baptistry, Ravenna, circa 450, mosaic.



8a. Justinian mosaic, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, 547, mosaic.



8b. Theodora mosaic, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, 547, mosaic.



Figure 9. Lamb Sarcophagus, early sixth century, marble, Sant' Apollinare in Classe.



Figure 10. Honorius Sarcophagus, late sixth century, marble, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna.

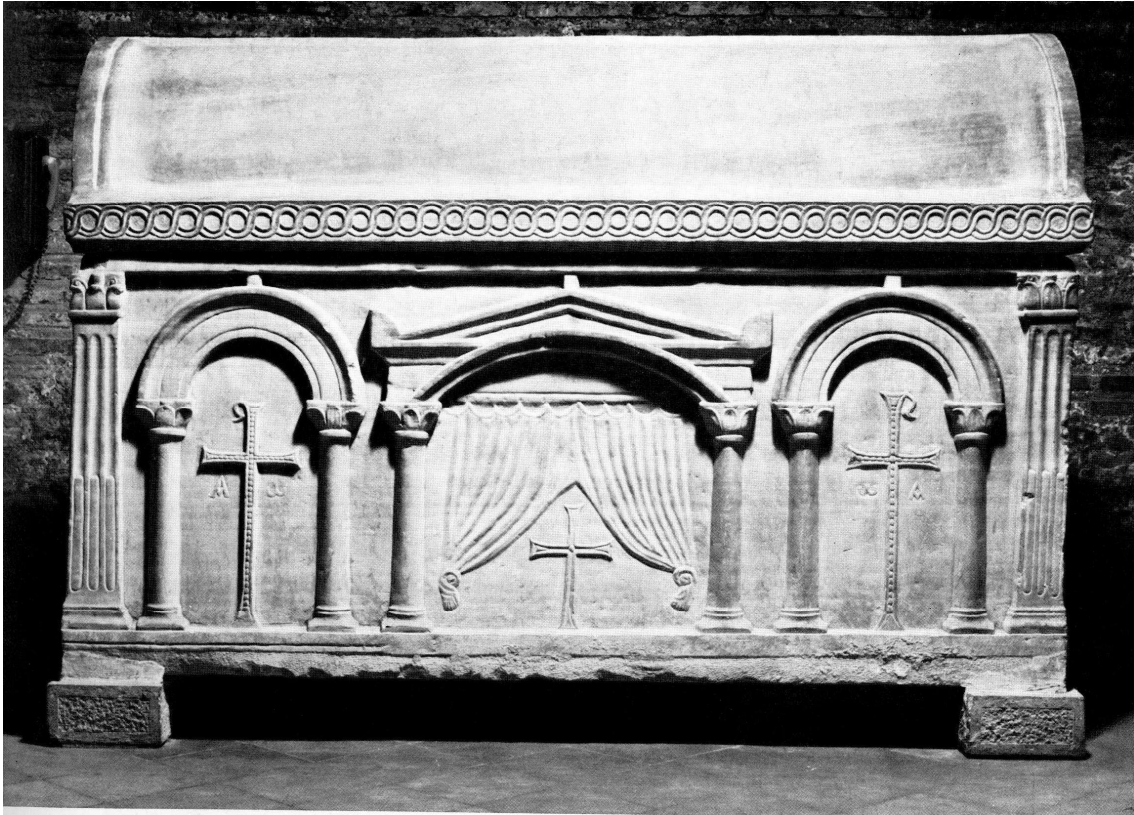


Figure 11. Sarcophagus from Sant' Apollinare in Classe, early sixth century, marble.



Figure 12. Apse, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, 547, mosaic.

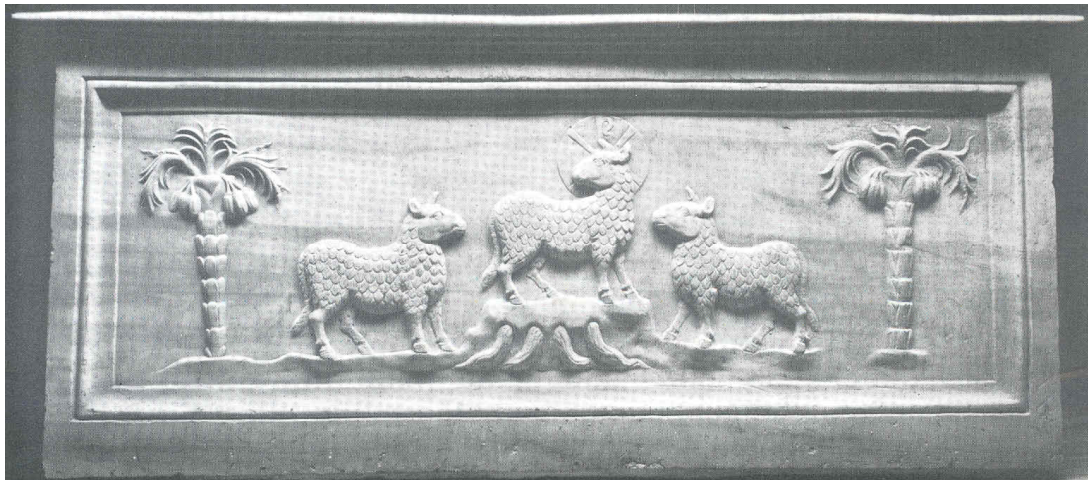


Figure 13. Constantius Sarcophagus, late sixth century, marble, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna.

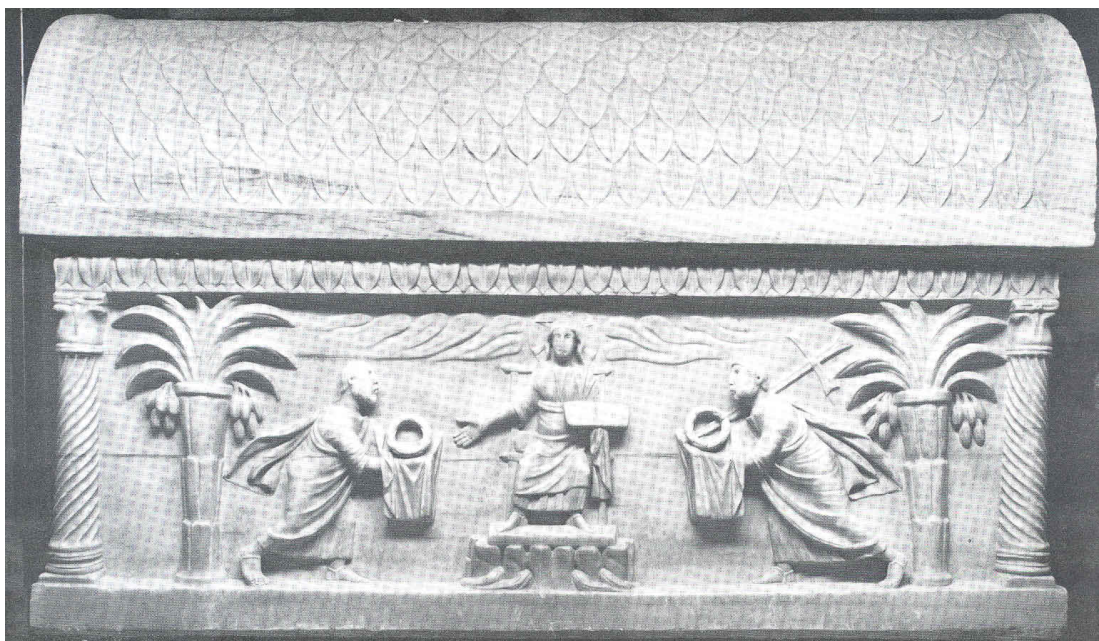


Figure 14. Rinaldo Sarcophagus, middle fifth century, marble, Ravenna Cathedral.



Figure 15. Twelve Apostles Sarcophagus, middle fifth century, marble, Sant' Apollinare in Classe.



Figure 16. Procession of Virgin Martyrs, Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, circa 561, mosaic.



Figure 17. Ceiling, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, sixth century, mosaic.



Figure 18. Trial of Bitter Water (detail), Milan Diptych.



Figure 19. Annunciation (detail), Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, circa 434, mosaic.



Figure 20. Statuette of an Enthroned Figure, Roman, first century A.D., bronze, Wirt D. Walker Fund, The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 21. Christ Enthroned, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, ninth century, mosaic.



Figure 22. *Traditio Legis*/Conferral of Crowns (detail), Milan Diptych.

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